

DELOS:  
The White Tree



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Chapter 01  
**The Twins**

Forces in the universe wanted Cynthia Summers and Kaden Krossway to be in the same place, to be together, this much was obvious to them. And they were better at everything just by being in close proximity. It had been suggested that their routinely-chance-defying encounters each and every year on their birthday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, simply meant that they were soulmates destined to fall in love and—

But this notion was quickly, and with repulsed twists of the body, shot down before it could be completed. “Dude, she’s my sister!” from Kaden was quickly followed by Cynthia gagging and saying, “Disgusting! He’s my brother!” “We’re twins,” they’d finish in unison, to which the suggester would, after eyeing the highly unique-looking black girl called Cynthia and the easily overlookable white boy named Kaden, let out a laugh, followed by the customary, “Twins? Yeah, right.”

And here it was yet again.

“Twins? Yeah, right,” said the final lunch customer of the day, a fifty-year-old man with an unshaven face, from his seat on the back patio of The Oaken Door restaurant in Old Town, Virginia. He then produced from his pocket a tip for his waiter, a few silver coins and a paperclip, which he dropped onto the black mesh-metal tabletop, before rounding things off by scoffing a laugh at Cynthia and Kaden.

Today, May 31<sup>st</sup>, was the day before their sixteenth birthday, and though technically underage they both worked here at The Oaken Door, Cynthia being a (pretty bad) hostess and Kaden being a (very good) bus boy. The owner, Mr. Boreall, a rather eccentric

old man who had never shown the slightest inkling of interest in running a restaurant, had taken an immediate liking to them a year ago almost to the day, on their 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, when they had officially broken the scientific fields of Mathematics and Probabilities by once again finding themselves, despite living an ocean apart, together in the same place on their birthday; this time it had been while having lunch on this very patio, with their tables having been separated by the grand oak tree growing through the very middle of the patio itself. Kaden had been thrilled for the chance to make some spending money, and Cynthia had been very convincing in acting thrilled, not wanting Kaden to know that restaurant work was right there alongside ditch-digging and coffin-testing when it came to things that she never wanted to do, even for money.

Beneath the warm afternoon sun, the unshaven man tossed his napkin beside his white ceramic plate, on which a small lump of ketchup was the lone survivor of a house specialty burger and a large pile of seasoned fries. He rose from his seat on the red-bricked patio and walked toward the sliding glass door leading into the restaurant, but he stopped to frown perplexedly, even harshly, at a large statue of a very odd-looking horse.

"What the hell's this thing supposed to be?" he said brusquely. "A horse?"

"I think so, yes," said Cynthia, who spoke in the very proper style of language called *Queen's English*.

"Maybe the artist should've looked at an actual horse before making a statue of one, because this thing...it's all wrong."

"I'll make sure to let the artist know," said Kaden. "Because he's also the owner of this restaurant."

The man eyed Kaden for several long seconds. "You being smart with me, boy?"

"Smart?" said Kaden. "Nope. Cyn's smart, though," he added, pointing at Cynthia.

The man then eyed Cynthia, though much differently from how he had eyed Kaden, especially when taking in her exotic-looking, metallic silver hair and equally chrome-colored eyes.

"Where're you from?" he asked her, now sounding curious.

"Knightsbridge," said Cynthia. "That's in London, England."

The man turned his attention back to Kaden. "And you, boy, where're you from?"

"Southern California," said Kaden. "And then Arizona, and then Colorado, and as of last year my folks took jobs at Vanguard High School up the road in Alexandria, so now I'm from here."

"Yeah, didn't need a history lesson, boy," said the man shortly. "Just wondering why you two claim to be twins when – well, you aren't even from the same place, and...come on, seriously? She's black and you're white. I'm pretty sure that the entire scientific field of Biology makes you two being twins impossible."

"Yeah, we've heard that once or twice," said Kaden, shrugging.

The man snorted at Kaden, then he turned to Cynthia, appearing ready to continue arguing his fact-based certainty that they couldn't be related by blood, but the sight of her exotic features caused him, instead, to turn his attention to yet another pair of seeming impossibilities: her hair and eyes.

"I've seen a lot of pictures of chicks on the internet, but I've never seen anyone like you," he said, drawing grimaces on both Cynthia and Kaden's faces, as each had a pretty good guess as to the types of pictures that this man routinely looked at online. "You dye your hair to make it look so...so...brightly silver, right?" he asked her pointedly. She shook her head. "But you must be wearing special contact lenses to make your eyes look...wow. They look like extra-shiny hubcaps."

"Nope, no contacts," said Cynthia, mentally adding this newest comparison of her eye color, this one being to the wheels of a car, to the extremely long list of them, as practically everyone that she encountered tried to put into words their surprise and wonder at this highly distinctive and noticeable feature of hers. "Just always been this way."

"Darlin', you are..." The man scratched his stubble-covered chin as he looked her slender body and long legs up and down, his grin growing larger – and creepier – all the while. "...just, *wow*. You ever do any dancing?"

"Maybe," she said, grinning back at him, and causing Kaden to eye her quite worriedly. "I might even dance for you," she said coyly, tilting her head just a bit. "But only if the next time that you come here to see me is during the dinner shift." Then she winked one of her silver eyes at him.

"Will do, darlin'," he said eagerly, his face slightly flushed

with anticipation. Then he turned and walked through the sliding back door, a bounce to his step.

Kaden was, by now, gaping in disbelief at Cynthia, for it was completely unlike her to flirt so conspicuously with a much older and rather rude man who, if soliciting dances from almost-sixteen-year-olds was a common practice, also qualified as being extremely slimy – and maybe a felon. But all that Kaden actually managed to get out was, “Um, Cyn, we don’t work any dinner shifts.”

“Exactly,” she said, grinning. “Like I want that old perv looking me up and down again. And did he actually think that I’d dance for him?” she laughed – before shuddering at the thought.

“Oh...that was clever of you,” laughed Kaden, realizing that she had effectively tricked the man into never coming back here while they were working. “You had me worried there for a minute.”

After a sweeping look around the patio and confirming that they were alone, Cynthia plopped down on a chair at the recently departed table.

“I hate working,” she groaned, lowering her head to the tabletop’s mesh metal, which, thanks to the late May sun, felt comfortably warm against her cheek.

“You love working,” said Kaden, putting the table’s dirty plate and glass in his deep bussing tray and then sitting beside her. “Just not this kind of work.”

“Schoolwork isn’t work,” she said. “It’s...fun.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Kaden truthfully. “I hate schoolwork.”

From her sideways vantage point, Cynthia found herself looking at the grand oak tree growing at the very center of the back patio. Though it was just a tree, it had always been a very special tree to both herself and Kaden. For it was around this very oak tree that she and Kaden had played tag on their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, this also being both of their first memories.

“I used to dream about this tree all the time,” said Cynthia, her words emerging from a face that was slightly smooshed against the tabletop. “And I’ve started to again.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Kaden, wiping his forehead, which was slightly sweaty from all the bussing that he had done during a very busy lunch. “Actually, I’ve been dreaming about it a lot lately.”

“Probably from the stress of exams,” said Cynthia, then trying

unsuccessfully to blow several strands of silver hair from her eyes. "You know, needing to see something comforting when everything else in the world is so...stressful."

"And exams were definitely stressful," said Kaden, sincerely glad that they were over with. "Hopefully I didn't fail any of them." His attention was drawn about ten feet up the grand oak tree to its distinctive double-knot, which looked rather like the number 8, with one knot being stacked almost directly above the other.

"Ouch." Wincing in pain, Cynthia sat upright and began massaging her temples, enduring the pain of yet another sudden headache. She noticed that Kaden had begun itching his ear. "Still hearing those weird echo noises?"

"Yeah. And they really are weird—as well as itchy," he said annoyedly. "It's like...almost being able to hear something, but not actually being able to hear it—but still hearing it—itchily. But it's the even weirder throbs of phantom pain that're the most annoying."

Kaden had started calling them *phantom pains* because it felt like they were coming from—well, from him, but not from any actual parts of his body. It was more like he could feel pain in his arm, but as if his arm was extended sideways even though it was actually hanging down normally at his side. But it was Cynthia's headaches that he was most worried about because he knew that she had a truly special mind and he really didn't want anything to be wrong with it.

"Your headaches have been getting worse, haven't they, Cyn?"

"They've been absolutely infuriating," she said, her eyes squinting from the pain presently issuing from just behind them. "It's like—like—I don't know...like I'm having a windy migraine. The pain feels like it's blowing around inside my head—like a strong and super-frustrating breeze or something."

Just like their dreams about the grand oak tree, these strange symptoms had been coming on much more frequently as of late, and with greater intensity too.

As the pain in her head began to abate, Cynthia let out an exhale of relief. Then, like a stage actor delivering a climactic line, she declared in an exaggerated and carrying voice, "My birthday wish is for my windy headaches to go away and never come back!"

“Your birthdays aren’t till tomorrow,” said a man’s gravelly voice from the center of the patio, successfully causing Kaden to jump in his chair and Cynthia to let out a squeal of fright, as both had been certain that the patio was completely empty.

The stranger that they turned to find walking—or limping, rather—just past the grand oak tree toward the sliding back door of the restaurant was too well-kempt to be a homeless person but too unkempt to be a reputable customer. And he was limping against...nothing. Yet he was moving his arm and leaning toward it as if he held a very tall cane.

Lowly, so that only Kaden could hear her, Cynthia whispered, “He kind of looks like an evil Gandalf in desperate need of a shower and tailor.”

Kaden caught his laugh in his throat.

“Whoa,” Kaden whispered back, “check out his eye.” Well, it wasn’t so much an eye as it was a wooden eyepatch around which there could be seen an outward-radiating series of horrible scars that, on the whole, looked unnervingly like a spiderweb of discolored and raised flesh.

“Who’s this Gandalf person?” asked the eye-patched man, darting a sideways glance at Cynthia, who, rather than respond with words, simply gaped back while wondering how on earth he had heard her whispering.

After a moment or two, when it became clear that he wouldn’t be getting an answer, the stranger turned his good eye to Kaden.

“And this here,” he said, pointing a dirty finger at the grisly spiderweb of scarred flesh that surrounded what at one time was presumably a second eye. “This is...a story best left for another time.” He then continued limping ahead, and still as if leaning rather heavily against an extremely tall cane that simply wasn’t there.

“Wait a sec,” said Cynthia, just now registering what he had first said. “How’d you know that our birthday is tomorrow?”

But the maybe-hobo stranger, rather than reply, had chosen to stop and admire the statue of the kind-of horse. He was examining its elongated and slender features. The head, which he was currently admiring, looked like a horse’s head in general appearance, but only if it had been stretched out to nearly twice its normal length while getting no wider. And its legs were far too long, its body too narrow. Yet Cynthia had secretly always liked

the way this horse-ish creature stood, as there was a distinctly feminine grace to it.

"You really did capture her aspect, Boreall," said the eye-patched man without looking away from the statue.

Cynthia and Kaden jumped again, for they hadn't seen the very old – but somehow never seeming very old – and very tall Mr. Boreall making his way through the sliding back door, his vibrantly cerulean-blue eyes on the eye-patched man.

"You're too kind," said Boreall to the stranger, a magnificent smile raising his lined and wizened face. "I had to replicate my original statue of Alassyn from memory."

"And quite a memory it is, friend," said the eye-patched man, now patting the statue's elongated stone head.

"Alassyn?" Cynthia mouthed to Kaden.

"Yes, Alassyn," said the eye-patched man, who could neither have heard her say it, as she hadn't actually produced any words, nor could he have seen her mouth it – not without having looked through the back of his head, at least.

"Alassyn was the mother of an entire race of horses called *potnias*," said Boreall in his uplifting, gusting voice. Upon receiving a pair of raised eyebrows from Cynthia and Kaden, neither of whom had ever heard of a type of horse called *potnia*, he explained, "A legend from my homeland."

"Which is...where?" urged Kaden, for Mr. Boreall had routinely referred to his homeland without ever revealing exactly where it was located.

"By the sea," said Boreall elusively, smiling. The smile faded, however, and his expression became tense, even grave, as he turned to the stranger. "So...it's finally time, I take it?"

"It is," said the eye-patched man curtly. Then he limped his way into the restaurant. He was nearly inside when he stopped and turned, fixing his good eye on Cynthia and Kaden. "Since I won't be seeing you again before it happens, happy birthday, you two." He paused, leaned against his non-existent staff, and let out a sigh. "Let's hope it's not your last."

Cynthia and Kaden promptly shared confused – and slightly alarmed – glances.

"Um...it won't be our last," said Kaden, turning back to the stranger, but the eye-patched man had already limped into the



restaurant and out of earshot.

Frowning, Cynthia looked at Mr. Boreall. "Why would he say something like that?"

Boreall made another smile at them but didn't provide an answer. Then his face became suddenly serious.

"I need the two of you back here tonight at eleven-thirty. Under normal circumstances I'd never ask you to break school rules and leave campus after hours. However, circumstances are anything but normal at present."

"Oh you're being serious?" said Cynthia, studying his solemn expression.

"I am indeed," said Boreall, nodding. "And please don't be late."

"Um...okay, I guess," said Kaden warily.

Boreall looked expectantly at Cynthia.

"Yeah, okay," she said, despite being completely unable to come up with a single reason why he might want them back here at such a late hour.

Boreall nodded slowly then made a small bow. "Eleven-thirty, then." Turning, he stepped through the sliding back door and closed it behind him, leaving Cynthia and Kaden all alone, and quite confused, in their seats at the table beside the grand oak tree.

Chapter 02  
**The Oaken Door**

A couple hours later, in the common room between their adjoining boys' and girls' dormitories at Vanguard High School, Cynthia and Kaden were joined by their best friends and fellow sophomores, Jessie West and Manning Moore. Cynthia and Kaden were sitting on a foam-cushioned sofa that made up for in durability what it lacked in comfort, as it, like the rest of the furniture in here, was at the repeated yearly mercy of raucous and rambunctious—and rarely gentle—fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds. Cynthia was thumbing through a biology textbook that had been left for dead now that final exams were over.

Their casual conversation about what each would be doing over summer break changed abruptly when Jessie and Manning shared a meaningful glance.

"So...we've got something for you," said Jessie a bit apprehensively, looking at Cynthia and Kaden through a pair of black-framed glasses.

"Yeah, we think it's time that you put yer money where yer mouth is," said Manning far less apprehensively, speaking in a deep Southern drawl. He was on the verge of saying something else when he suddenly stood and raced out of the common room.

"That was weird," said Kaden.

But Cynthia was looking suspiciously at Jessie, who definitely didn't want to meet her eye. "What're you up to?"

Jessie, with reddening cheeks, made a series of awkward shrugs and inaudible mumbles. She was saved any further embarrassment by Manning, whose sneakers squeaked on the tile

hallway floor as he, running, turned and hit the carpeted common room. In his hand was a small rectangular box, which, rather than hand politely over, suddenly and intentionally departed his grip at high speed, heading directly between Cynthia and Kaden on the couch.

Manning grinned knowingly as Kaden adroitly swiped it from midair; and he laughed loudly – as well as knowingly – as Cynthia squealed, covered her face with her forearms as if a handful of scorpions were coming her direction, and, with an impressive knee-jerk, sent the textbook in her lap flying into a nearby window.

Even Kaden chuckled at her reaction. Then he looked down at the rectangular box that he had caught.

“Seriously?” he said, looking up at Manning and Jessie. “Check this out, Cyn.”

Composing herself in a very dignified way, Cynthia sat upright, brushed her long and brightly silver hair behind her ears and then examined the box, which bore highly stylized wording above a slogan:

*Sibil DNA Testing Kit*

*“For the best results, always ask a sibyl!”*

“DNA tests?” said Cynthia confusedly.

“Yer always tellin’ everyone that yer twins,” said Manning, not unkindly and not accusingly – well, a little accusingly, for he shared in the prevailing certainty that Cynthia and Kaden couldn’t possibly be biological brother and sister, much less bona fide twins. “And, frankly, it’s a little weird.”

Staring down decidedly at her socked feet, Jessie said faintly, “It *is* a little weird. Not in a bad way,” she added quickly, now so red in the face that she greatly resembled a bespectacled cherry. “I mean, I *definitely* believe you when you say that you’re twins. Definitely.” She looked up at Cynthia and, clearly trying hard to sound genuine, said, “*Definitely.*”

Manning, with a jovial smirk and nod at the box in Kaden’s hand, said, “I see that yer not in any hurry to take a DNA test.” It was evident that he thought that he had somehow been proven right – at least, until Cynthia and Kaden laughed out loud, effectively turning his smirk into a frown.

Even Jessie looked shocked. “So...you’re really going to do it?”

"Yep," said Kaden.

"Yeah, of course," said Cynthia, grinning.

And without another moment's hesitation Kaden opened the box and Cynthia removed both cheek swabs, handing one to him and keeping the other for herself. In unison they swabbed the insides of their cheeks, replaced the swabs in the protective casings and then returned the completed Sibil DNA Testing Kit to Manning, whose mouth now hung wide-open.

"But – but –" he stammered.

Jessie swiftly looked from Cynthia to Kaden then back to Cynthia. "But, Cynthia, what if it says, you know...that you two *aren't* related?"

But this only made Cynthia and Kaden laugh even louder than before, and these were genuinely mirth-filled laughs. And it was the sincerity of their laughter that caused Jessie and Manning to exchange looks of pity and produce rather sad smiles in return, each knowing with certainty what awaited Cynthia and Kaden two months from now when their DNA test results came back...the cold, heartbreaking truth that they were *not* twin siblings.

At 11:05 that night, after lights-out for the students, Cynthia crept quietly down the back stairwell of her dorm to a first-floor bathroom, where she opened a large window and then crawled through/toppled out of it into the dark and fresh-smelling night air. She stuck to the bushes where best she could, otherwise taking great care to stay out of the light of the many lampposts.

Vanguard High School was a vast and sprawling property with a long front drive beset by large fields of grass. It was home to dozens of buildings, every variety of sporting field, and two long streets with houses for the majority of faculty and staff, as well as their families. And to ensure the safety of the nearly five-hundred people living here, regular sweeps were made by campus security, which meant that Cynthia had to proceed with caution.

Kaden was waiting for her at the end of the long front drive. They Ubered it into Old Town and arrived at The Oaken Door with just minutes to spare.

Kaden was wearing a pair of old jeans and a gray Vanguard High School athletic tee shirt that bore the phrase: *No Pain, No Gain*. He hadn't actually chosen this shirt, just grabbed the nearest one

to him while hastily getting dressed in the dark. Cynthia, on the other hand, looked like she was going clubbing—well, going to attempt to sneak into a dance club, at least. Her stylish jeans were studded down the legs with glittery stones, and her designer blouse was slightly low-cut.

“You going to a party after this that I don’t know about?” said Kaden, able to see her full ensemble now that they were under the brightly lit entrance to The Oaken Door.

“Yeah, well, you look like you got dressed in the dark,” shot back Cynthia, finding the front door to be locked.

“That’s because I *did* get dressed in the dark,” said Kaden, leading them through a narrow alleyway to the back patio, which was enclosed by a brick wall, one that he climbed over with ease. “It’s not even that high,” he laughed as Cynthia struggled to simultaneously climb the wall and keep her fancy clothes from brushing up against it and getting dirty. “At least you’re not in heels,” he remarked as she landed gracelessly on the patio and then proceeded to nearly tear his shirt, which she had grabbed ahold of to keep from falling down completely. In truth, he knew that she wasn’t actually graceless, but he also knew that it wouldn’t do any good to tell her that she couldn’t easily climb a wall while also not touching that wall, so he had chosen the topic of footwear instead.

“I don’t wear heels with jeans,” she said, straightening up and then futilely attempting to pat down the stretch mark that her clutched fist had left on Kaden’s tee.

“Um, I’ve seen you wear heels with jeans before.”

“But not with *this* outfit.”

“But definitely with jeans.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Actually, yes, with the same jeans that you’re wearing now.”

Cynthia gave him a sideways glance. Then she grinned. “Yeah, well, I looked dashing, didn’t I?”

He smiled back at her, laughing.

The sliding back door was unlocked. Cynthia led the way inside, finding the quaint restaurant to be completely empty. Only a quarter of the ceiling’s yellow-hued lights were on, reflecting darkly off the waxed wooden floor, and the usual indistinguishable medley of cooking scents filled their noses, either wafting in from the kitchen or simply having bonded permanently with the very walls themselves.

"Must be in his office," said Kaden, leading them into the restaurant's shiny chrome-countered kitchen.

"What a shocker," said Cynthia sarcastically, as Mr. Boreall basically spent all of his time up there.

"What does he even own a restaurant for?" asked Kaden, pushing open a thick door that led to a staircase.

"No idea. I only ever see him when we get here for work and when we leave. He always makes a point to say *hello* and *goodbye* to us." Cynthia smiled, taking the stairs two at a time. "He's so nice."

"But especially to us. I mean, he's nice to everyone," Kaden went on quickly. "But—"

"Yeah, he dotes on us," finished Cynthia, stopping before the office door and knocking on it.

"Enter," came the gusting voice of Boreall.

Cynthia pushed it open and they entered.

Boreall's office was both surprisingly large and surprisingly cramped, running the entire length of the restaurant one-floor below. It looked like part museum, part workshop, part library, and part artist's loft; and it was always filled with dozens upon dozens of exquisite, highly detailed maps that, as far as either Cynthia or Kaden could tell, didn't correlate to any location on earth.

Boreall was pacing anxiously along the rear wall of the office as they navigated the stacks of books, easels, and many object-laden tables. They came to a stop beside a corner table that was shockingly devoid of clutter, having only two smallish, identical gift-boxes.

When Boreall only continued pacing anxiously, Kaden turned his attention to the oil painting on the wall. It was of a very large and very unique-looking house, one that rose to three staggered stories while having neither hard edges nor ninety-degree angles. It looked rather like the gusting wind had been the driving force that had given this place its unique appearance.

"Mr. Boreall, sir?" said Cynthia tentatively.

He came to a stop but didn't turn immediately. Rather, he stood perfectly still with his cerulean gaze fixed firmly ahead, as if steeling himself for something that he didn't particularly want to do. After a few deep breaths and a firm nod of the head, he turned

his lined and wizened face to them. He had just opened his mouth to speak when he noticed Kaden admiring the painting behind him.

"Ah...that was my home," said Boreall, smiling reminiscently. "It's called Windblown Manor."

Cynthia raised an eyebrow at him, confused—and a little concerned—by this sudden willingness to be so open about his past.

"Why're you telling us this now, sir?" she asked suspiciously. "Because we must've asked you about this painting thirty times before."

"Because," said Boreall, his smile faltering, "things are different now. Did you know," he went on quickly, before Cynthia could ask *how exactly things were different now*, "that many years ago I was bestowed a ring made from the extremely rare and highly precious chrius metal? It was on the day of my daughter's wedding, in fact."

"What's chrius?" asked Cynthia, her face puckered. "I've never heard of it."

"You have a daughter?" said Kaden, shocked to learn this highly personal detail about him.

"I did," said Boreall softly. "Sadly, she passed away."

"Oh," said Kaden awkwardly. "Sorry to hear that."

"I'm sure that she loved you very much," said Cynthia genuinely.

"How very kind of you to say," said Boreall, suddenly misty-eyed. Then he reached down and, from a nearby drawer, produced a very simple-looking golden ring, holding it flush in his palm for them to see.

"Um...that's just normal gold," said Kaden confusedly.

"But is it?" said Boreall enticingly. "Or is it something more like a cousin to gold? Ah-h-h, you see it now," he exhaled as Cynthia's eyes widened.

"It's...it's...But is it glowing?" she said in shock. "I've never heard of a metal that can glow."

And now Kaden saw it too. It was like the ring had a very soft golden aura that was issuing from the metal itself, though, strangely, it had taken a solid five seconds of staring at it before this goldish halo of light could be seen.

"Yes, I thought that you two would enjoy seeing this," said

Boreall, then glancing quickly at a clock on the wall. "Midnight approaches...We need to get out back." Immediately, and with long strides, he made his way for the office door, swiping the smallish gift-boxes from the corner table as he passed by it.

"Something's going on, Kaden," said Cynthia lowly. "He's acting strange—even for him."

Kaden agreed but had nothing helpful to add, so he simply nodded that they should follow Mr. Boreall outside.

Soon they were passing through the sliding glass door and stepping out onto the brick patio, a gentle, pleasant breeze playing on their faces. It was a wonderfully clear night, the pale-silver moon shimmering down from the starry sky above. Boreall had come to a stop near the grand oak tree and turned so that he faced Cynthia and Kaden, who were definitely wearing their apprehension on their faces. Before either could vocalize it, however—

"Did you know," said Boreall, "that in certain cultures the oak tree represents a doorway?"

Cynthia and Kaden glanced confusedly at each other. Then they looked at the oak tree, which, they were prepared to say with certainty, was definitely only a tree.

"Oh!" said Cynthia, the pieces of one mystery falling into place. "That's why you named your restaurant *The Oaken Door*—it's after this oak tree here, in combination with the myth of oak trees being doorways."

"Indeed it is," said Boreall, sounding impressed. In the pause that followed he looked contemplatively at each of them through those magnificent cerulean eyes.

To her great aggravation, Cynthia found herself suddenly trying to fend off the beginning of one of her windy headaches; and Kaden, squirming beside her, was starting to feel a pulsating phantom pain in each of his arms, but as if they were being held above his head even though they were draped down at his sides, not to mention he could now also hear the distant echo of a non-existent noise.

"Oh my, I nearly forgot," said Boreall, giving a gift-box to each of them. "These're for you."

"That's so nice of you," said Cynthia, valiantly trying to sound sincere despite the pain that she was currently experiencing in her



head.

“Oh they’re not from me, my dear,” said Boreall courteously, shaking his head. “They’re from...*her*.”

“*Her...who?*” asked Kaden, the strange phantom pains worsening, extending down to his legs, as he removed the box’s cover.

“You’ll come to know her by many names,” said Boreall. “But there’s one name by which she’s known to all...the Lil of Lurkur.”

“Who’s the Lil of—? Ooh, it’s magnificent!” said Cynthia, having pulled a stunning compass made from pure white wood from her gift-box. And the compass seemed to feel the same way about her, she thought—until she reminded herself that compasses weren’t capable of *feeling* anything.

“Cool, mine’s black,” said Kaden of the black-wooded compass that he had unwrapped, speaking a little more loudly than he realized because the shadowy, echoing noise was getting even louder in his ears. “Hey, I think that mine likes me,” he said. Then he shook his head, wondering how he could’ve thought anything so ridiculous.

“Keep them with you at all times,” said Boreall very seriously, sounding almost insistent. “It’s extremely important that you do this. For they’ll prove quite useful.”

“Huh? Oh okay, we will,” said Cynthia, now having difficulty focusing on Boreall through the mounting, swirling pain in her head.

Boreall quickly checked his wristwatch. “Just a few minutes left,” he muttered. Swiftly dropping to a knee before them, he spoke increasingly loudly, as if he somehow knew exactly what they were currently experiencing: “Destiny has intervened in your lives many times, has it not, and always on your birthday, by bringing you together in ways that seem beyond improbable, even impossible?”

Squinting hard now, Cynthia nodded, as did a wincing Kaden.

“Well, the time’s come for you to...intervene in destiny,” said Boreall in his gusting voice. “And make no mistake about it, if you choose to do this, then know that you’re choosing to forever change the course of your lives...as well as much, much more...perhaps everything.” He extended an arm to the oak tree, which was doing something very funny now: it was pulsating, and with each pulse it was coming in and out of focus. “What do you see there?”

"A tree," said Kaden, flinching from a particularly bad throb of phantom pain.

"An oak tree," said Cynthia, not having heard Kaden, the swirling pain in her head being too intense.

Boreall, while smiling kindly at them, shook his head side to side.

"No, there's no tree there," he said very loudly, thus ensuring that they could hear him. "In fact, there's *never* been a tree there."

"Huh? No, there's *always* been a tree there," Kaden nearly yelled.

"Our first memory is of playing tag around this tree," said Cynthia, this time able to hear Kaden due to the sheer volume of his voice.

"On your fourth birthday, right?" said Boreall, to which they made valiant attempts at nodding back, but mostly just grimaced. "No. You weren't even here on your fourth birthday. Cynthia, you were in the backyard of your London home. And Kaden, you were at your neighbor's house in California playing in the front yard. The tree that you see behind me is quite real, I assure you, but it's most assuredly *not* here on the patio of a restaurant." He again gestured to the flickering oak tree. Then he brought them in so closely that their two faces almost touched his own. "Listen. Listen closely. And then you will hear it."

Despite the pounding of Cynthia's head, and despite the reverberating echoes filling Kaden's ears, they did as asked. Through their pain, they listened, listened, listened. And then...

They heard it.

And it was definitely coming from the oak tree, which was still flickering in and out of sight, but rhythmically, and it could be felt, almost like a heartbeat. But it wasn't a voice, the thing that they could hear.

...So why, then, could they understand it? Why did they know, with perfect certainty, that it was asking for their help? And why did they feel, to the very cores of their beings, as if they owed this unknown thing a great debt? Was it possible that it had done something, unbeknownst to them, to aid them at some point in their pasts? And when had they walked past Mr. Boreall to the very base of the oak tree? Had instinct driven them here? Had the urge to protect this unknown thing moved them so greatly that, even

subconsciously, they knew that they must go to it? Or had they been pushed here – pushed by the invisible hand of destiny itself?

“It needs our help,” said Kaden, looking at Cynthia.

“I think that it might die if we don’t help it,” she said, looking back at him.

“We can’t let it die.”

“We have to help it.”

The decision was made silently, and it was made without any further hesitation or need for debate. Whatever was happening was bigger than themselves, more important than they were, and they knew it...and they could even feel it.

Kaden looked over his shoulder. “What about our parents, Mr. Boreall?”

“They’ll worry when we can’t be found,” said Cynthia.

“It’s already been taken care of,” Boreall assured them. Then he smiled. “You can leave your cell phones here with me. You assuredly won’t be needing them, of that I’m certain.”

Facing Boreall, they handed over their cell phones, though this was a much more difficult thing for Cynthia to do, as parting from it, even amidst the raging pain in her head, felt like leaving a part of herself behind.

Then, in the distance, a church bell made a deep *dong* signaling the stroke of midnight...the official beginning to their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. When they turned around again it was to discover that the flickering tree had completely vanished, and in its place there was a door...a door made of pure white wood, a door that was hauntingly beautiful to gaze upon. And it was waiting to be opened, waiting on them.

“What will we find on the other side?”

Cynthia and Kaden turned their heads to find a magnificent smile raising Mr. Boreall’s face.

“Answers...answers to questions that you never even knew existed,” he said enticingly. “And don’t worry about understanding what is being said, or about being understood. The journey there will take care of that for you. After all, it did for me.” They stared blankly at him. “You can understand me, can you not?”

“Of course we can,” said Cynthia.

“You’re speaking English,” said Kaden.

“Oh...am I?” And on this final, mysterious response, Boreall

smiled and backed away. "Farewell."

As the urge to pass through the door became too strong to fight anymore, they waved goodbye to Mr. Boreall.

And then, as one, Cynthia Summers and Kaden Krossway faced forward, this tall, silver-haired and silver-eyed black girl, and this unimpressive-looking, brown-haired white boy, these two newly turned sixteen-year-olds who knew, to their very cores, what they were, despite it being utterly, absurdly, and laughably impossible...twins.

As they stepped toward it, the door opened of its own accord. There was a great silvery-white ripple in the air as they, side by side, stepped across its threshold, passing into some great unknown, not having any idea of where they were going...or of what dangers might lie beyond.